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Flyover Lives: A Memoir

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Flyover Lives: A Memoir, by Diane Johnson. New York: Viking, 2014. xviii, 263 pp. Illustrations. \$26.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Zachary Michael Jack is a seventh-generation Iowan, associate professor of English at North Central College, board member of the Midwestern History Association, and the author of *Iowa: The Definitive Collection*, among others.

I admire the craft of Diane Johnson's memoir, *Flyover Lives*, but I wouldn't recommend it to you, not if you much care about Midwest Present or Midwest Future. The author and the jet-setting lifestyle she spotlights here (she splits her time between San Francisco and Paris) represent an all-too-typical, and often painful, midwesterner trope—the best and brightest gone off to the world's many cosmopolitan Elsewheres, only to look back, if at all, in a memoir better suited to coastal sophisticates and ex-Iowans in Chicago and San Francisco and New York City than for the home folks.

Native Iowan Bill Bryson and native Illinoisan Diane Johnson have much in common; both have been happy not only to leave Iowa and the Midwest, but also to jettison America; both have made a handsome living critiquing their homeland well and widely; both return to our shores periodically to be reminded why they left, and of course to be inspired by the memory jog of provincial lives recalled and sometimes recoiled at. It might seem like I begrudge Bryson and Johnson their respective leavetakings. I don't. Bryson, unlike Johnson, is an amazing, sometimes transcendent storyteller whose jibes and digs against Des Moines he has lately tried to redress in warmed-over but not artless nostalgia of the kind served up in his memoir, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*. Johnson is an equally formidable, and by comparison, underrated literary talent; I found myself impressed by her laconically unerring prose.

Flyover Lives, though, is mostly a loosely strung together life story wholly lacking in the requisite narrative thru-line; at base it's a series of personal essays, many previously published in places like the *National Post* and the *New York Review of Books* belatedly (and badly) stitched together to make a book of the requisite heft. The writing here is at times masterful; it's worthwhile reading for anyone who admires the tradition of *belles lettres*. Still, only a writer of Johnson's advanced billing (the promotional materials are anxious to remind you, lest you've never heard of her, that she is both American-born and twice a nominee for the Pulitzer Prize) would merit such a scattershot and often self-indulgent biographical pastiche.

Johnson offers little for an Iowa reader in this slim memoir, though a few breadcrumbs are left us by dint of the author's Iowa-born father, who, as Johnson takes pains to mention, comes from the Hacklebarney

Region of the state, and via her mention of her Uncle Bill from Sioux City, whom Johnson ultimately commits to a madhouse. Those who grew up in the Quad Cities in the 1930s and 1940s may find the author's decorous, distanced, and elegiac rendering of her fortunate family's salad years on the Illinois side of the river of interest, though the closest her announced reading tour for the book came to Moline was Chicago. Though chapters on her post-Depression, prewar childhood in Moline and, to a lesser extent, Rock Island, are allotted roughly 30 of the first 50 pages, the balance of the book concerns the author's matrilineal line rooted in small-town Chenoa and Watseka, Illinois, and her later literary life spent in places like Los Angeles, New York, London, and Paris. It takes until the book's epilogue for the author to confess what a savvy reader suspected all along—that she spent more than 50 years away from Moline without coming back, only to return briefly for a high-school reunion as an inspiration for this epilogue-of-a-life-story. Iowa receives an even more distanced treatment, as our fly-by author mostly gazes at us from across the river.

Midwestern readers are likely to grapple with class resentments reading *Flyover Lives*, in between admiring the artful prose of this courageous writer. By *courageous* I mean that the book exemplifies the kind of psychological bravery that octogenarians come by naturally—to render the events of their lives unemotionally, unsentimentally, and without the saccharine sweetness of a sugarcoat. Johnson's life of *au pairs*, affairs, married lovers, trophy husbands, French homes, and literary liaisons with the likes of Stanley Kubrick and Francis Ford Coppola seems foreign, literally and figuratively, to this Iowa reader. There are some sublime personal essays here to be sure on such universal midwestern topics as cabins in the woods and Middle American summers (I recommend the contiguous chapters "Rich in Uncles" and "Summer," which are as fine a set of cursory personal essays as you are likely to find in print), but the balance of the memoir is just too remote, too distanced, and too high-flying to merit more than superficial emotional attachment.

The comic-book styled cover art of Johnson's memoir, showing a confident, cartoon woman piloting a single prop plane from the Eiffel Tower high across a Middle America, symbolized by a cartoon barn and a tractor, to a terminus at the Golden Gate Bridge, is, in the end, far too indicative of the book's unsparing and sometimes uncaring detachment. In saying this, I feel somehow as if I ought to apologize to Johnson, whose craft I sincerely admire. But she is so high up in this, her high-flying life story, that I am reminded of squinting up into the eastern Iowa skies as a boy, wondering where on earth all those jet planes

were going and why. The moment they were out of earshot, I promptly forgot to care about those flyover lives, occupied as I was by rock picking, hole digging, and bean hoeing — such homely lives as the rest of us, grounded, are left to wrest from the land.

The Heart of Things: A Midwestern Almanac, by John Hildebrand. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2014. xi, 188 pp. \$22.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Barbara J. Dilly is associate professor of anthropology at Creighton University and an Iowa resident. Her current research focuses on popular culture images of young women in American agriculture. She also applies her research and personal experience as an active participant in the transformation of American agriculture toward more sustainable practices in the Midwest.

In *The Heart of Things*, John Hildebrand helps midwesterners appreciate our lives. He urges us to recognize that we live in interesting places, that we are interesting people. As we read, we can hear ourselves and our neighbors tell our stories. We can sense the importance of day-to-day events like the ones we recorded in those almanacs that hung on the wall. Hildebrand interprets a culturally rich childhood on the farm from his wife's old pocket diary. It was a time and place in which children learned early the harsh realities of life. On February 4, 1965, at the age of 11, she wrote, "It warmed up to 4 above. Then it got windy. When we got home from school had to chase the sheep in because some are going to have lambs." In this ordinary diary, Hildebrand reads and writes a life of useful people. On February 28, young Sharon writes, "Had triplet lambs last night. Went to church. It was nice today too. In the afternoon we thought March would come in like a lamb. We were holding lambs all afternoon."

This work is not just heartwarming; it is also instructive. A celebrated creative writer, Hildebrand is also widely recognized as a scholar and a teacher. He not only understands the Midwest and makes it understandable to those who do not live here, but he also teaches midwesterners to be curious about and reflect on the rich meanings of their own lives. Hildebrand conveys appreciation and deep respect for the extraordinary in the ordinary by seeing the fullness in simplicity. He recognizes how local people solidify group cohesiveness in small talk. Driving down country roads, he asks of every place he passes, "What would it be like to live here?" He sees a whole world of meaning in domestic obligations and reminds us that that is what makes life interesting. Hildebrand notices a lilac bush on the tangled river bank and wonders how it got there. Realizing he has stumbled across an old farmstead site, he imagines what kind of woman planted it and how she